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ABSTRACT

Communicating with future generations is not merely a question of "how" to communicate, but also of "what." Our major moral responsibilities to future generations concern the size of future populations, conservation of nonrenewable resources, diversity of the gene pool, and quality of the environment. To determine our responsibilities in these areas, let us accept five presuppositions: (1) as members of the human species, future generations will be essentially the same as we are; (2) future generations will seek pleasure, just as we do; (3) it is an accident of history that one is born in any given generation; (4) our survival as a species is more important than our individual survival; and (5) we are one with future generations and will share actively in their lives. Based on these presuppositions, we can say that we owe to future people the opportunity to meet their basic needs for a decent life. Our responsibility to future generations is to preserve diversity, both of the gene pool and of resources. We are obliged to leave them with the kinds and quantities of nonrenewable resources we can reasonably anticipate they will need. We are part of a species and share in the common responsibility for that species and its continuation. (HTH)

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# Can We Communicate With Other Generations?

Communicating with our contemporaries is relatively easy today, and thanks to a myriad of new techniques, it is getting easier all the time. Communicating with members of future generations is much more problematic, yet just as important.

It is already a commonplace to refer to global interdependence as evidence in favor of expanding international communication: what one does here affects what happens there. But we also share this planet with members of other generations: what we do now affects what happens then. Therefore, some form of intergenerational communication is also necessary.

Of course, communicating with members of another generation cannot take the same forms as the interactions we have with members of our own. The most important difference is that intergenerational communication is necessarily uni-directional. The past can speak to us; we can speak to the future. Only in the realm of fantasy can we speak to the past or can the future speak to us.

Universities, libraries, and cultural institutions of all kinds attest to the importance of what past generations can say to us. We study history--in all its diverse forms--because we know that it contains something worthwhile for us. We erect monuments and celebrate holidays to remember, and thus to be inspired and renewed by the past. Indeed, what we are today depends to a great extent upon how we have been formed by the generations that have preceded us.

When we look to future generations, our position towards them is analogous to the position of past generations towards us. We are the data out of which the future will be formed. What we are and do today

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will limit or create their options, and in this way we profoundly help to shape their destiny. Therefore, communicating with future generations is, for us, not merely a question of how we communicate, but also of what. And what kind of world we leave to the future is essentially a question of moral responsibility.

## The Major Issues

What are our responsibilities to future generations? I believe there are four key issues:

1. Size of future populations.
2. Conservation of non-renewable resources.
3. Diversity of the gene pool.
4. Environmental quality.

In recent years we have seen a slowing in the rate of population increase, so that today many countries are already approaching zero population growth. Population forecasts for the future, therefore, have been revised downward because fewer people born now means fewer reproducing a generation from now.

Because each generation has the unique power to communicate life to the next, determining who will be members of future generations constitutes our first moral responsibility. Do we act wrongly when we fail to bring into existence persons whom we would reasonably expect to lead happy lives and contribute to the happiness of others? Does such a person have a right to live in a future generation? Would this imply that a potentially unhappy person has no right to existence? Are rights, then, simply a function of happiness?

Would it be morally acceptable simply to stop reproducing altogether? If this somehow seems unacceptable, and if, therefore, some people will

be members of future generations, do we have any responsibility to limit their numbers? If so, with what criteria do we so decide? As we can see, population policies raise a host of complex moral problems.

Resources are another area of ethical concern. We know that many of the non-renewable resources we consider vital to the maintenance of Western civilization are in short supply and will soon be exhausted at present rates of usage. Examples are petroleum, silver, zinc and tin. Would a responsible policy toward future generations require sacrifices in our present standard of living? Or can we assume that by creating a highly technological society we will leave future generations the requisite knowledge to find substitute materials among the more abundant products of the earth? For example, copper, once thought to be the ideal conductor for electrical communications systems is now being replaced by optical fibres, made from the very common substance silicon.

Closely related to this issue is that of preserving an adequate gene pool. The inheritied characteristics of every living organism, from bacterium to baby, are transmitted via a unique set of genes. Diversity in plants and animals is the effect of a random combination of genes in the reproductive process. So, the more genes in the "pool" to be chosen from, the more variety is possible.

When certain varieties of plants or animals become extinct, whole sets of genes are lost forever. Nevertheless, this is frequently allowed to happen because we want to raise only top-quality strains of plants and breeding animals, i.e., those with the largest yields and the most disease-resistence. So, some varieties are permitted to disappear, and their genes cease to be part of the gene pool, despite the loss to future research possibilities. Both diversity and quality, therefore,

are important to future generations. But how are they to be weighed against each other?

The fourth question about environmental quality for future generations is directly related to our pollution concerns. These extend from impurities in water and air to the protection of our ozone layer and the safe disposal of nuclear energy wastes. It would seem that, if we have any responsibility to future generations, we are at least obliged to leave them air to breathe, water to drink and soil to farm.

But what proportion of our wealth ought to be diverted to the task of safeguarding these elements? Must we bear the expense of cleaning up the mess bequeathed to us by past generations, or can we simply do our best not to increase the burden on the future? In short, what if the task of preserving environmental quality requires the sacrifice of our present life style? Are we morally obliged to make the adjustment?

## Some Presuppositions

Before we can hope to find some answers for the above questions, let me first suggest a set of presuppositions upon which we can find some general agreement:

1. <u>As members of the human species, future generations will be essentially the same as we are</u>. That is, they will have the same basic needs and seek the same basic rights. By basic needs I am referring, as a minimum, to those things necessary for human survival as we know it: food, water, air, space, etc. I also include, negatively, protection from life-destroying conditions, such as extreme temperatures, a poisoned environment, or damaging levels of radioactivity. I cite these needs, among others, because they seem directly derivable from the most basic human right, the right to exist. There are other rights and other needs,

too, but the claim to them is less powerful than the claims directly associated with life itself.

2. Future generations will seek their own pleasure, just as we do. Utilitarians call this the only motivating force of human activity, because all other motives can be reduced to this one. They have, therefore, proposed the general ethical principle that we should always seek to maximize human happiness and minimize human pain. Since persons born in future generations will still be part of our species, we can presume that this principle will describe their ethics as well. So the principle has intergenerational application. We are morally obliged to seek the maximum happiness of all people, present and future.

3. It is an accident of history that one is born in a given generation. None of us chose when he or she would be born. Since we could have been born into any generation, we have no claim to special interests for our own. Indeed, if an impartial observer could oversee all generations at once, and if he were asked to resolve the issues raised above, he would undoubtedly try to be fair to all generations--past, present and future. If this judgment is valid for the impartial observer, shouldn't it also be valid for members of every generation, including our own? The Golden Rule applies not just to contemporaries; it applies intergenerationally as well.

4. Our survival as a species is more important than our individual survival. As human beings, we are naturally inclined to protect our own interests and to pursue our own happiness. But most of us are willing to recognize that certain human goals supercede our own interests. For example, the destruction of mankind would be a greater disaster than a traffic accident in which one person were killed; and if I were to become

the single fatality, I would still be inclined to agree, even though the effect on me would be the same in either case. This principle is also evident from the fact that we humans acknowledge something special about the life of a child, and we grieve more profusely for a youngster who dies than for an old person who has "lived his life."

5. We are one with future generations, and we will share actively (even though not personally) in their lives. We communicate ourselves to them in the decision we make today. And long after we have personally passed from the scene, we will still be present in the memories, habits, and cultures of our descendents. Our present actions will continue to affect their range of choices and opportunities. In short, what we do now is the raw data out of which the future is formed. So, while we will not always participate personally in the events of this world, we will always be actively a part of what can and does happen here.

## Some Conclusions

If we accept these five presuppositions, we have some basis for drawing conclusions relative to the issues discussed earlier. Let us consider each of them in turn:

First, what is our obligation to future generations regarding the size of their population? On the basis of the importance of species survival, we do have a responsibility to provide for some future people. But how many? And are we obliged to these future people in the same way we are obliged to present people?

Here a distinction is in order between merely possible people and future actual people. Future actual people are those who will exist, even though we cannot know now who they will be individually. Merely possible people are those who could have existed, but will not exist,

because of the population policies we choose to pursue. Of these two groups, the former will have actual needs and rights as human beings and must therefore be included in our sense of responsibility. The latter, because they are not persons and never will be, cannot claim any such rights. Since merely possible persons have no rights or claims, our decision about size can be made without regard to them. Size, therefore, can be determined on the basis of the happiness principle as it affects all actual persons, both present and future. Whatever size brings about the greatest happiness to actual people would seem to be the most moral option.

Furthermore, our responsibility towards future actual persons would seem to be analogous to persons who are presently alive. This is because of the principle that membership in one generation vis-a-vis any other is accidental. This principle suggests that time has the same moral relevance as space in determining responsibility, i.e., whatever responsibilities we owe to present actual people are paralleled to the responsibilities we owe to future actual people.

What are these responsibilities? According to the principle of essential similarity among all members of the human species, it would include at least the fulfillment of basic human rights, the most fundamental of which is the right to exist. In other words, we owe to future actual people the opportunity to meet their basic needs for a decent life. This obligation is spelled out more fully in the following paragraphs, where the other three issues are considered.

The second and third issues concern the kinds and quantities of non-renewable resources and the qualityand diversity of the gene pool to be transmitted to future generations. These are not so difficult morally to resolve. Because of the accident factor that determines which generation

we are born into, there is a presumption of responsibility for providing for the future to the extent we provide for ourselves.

One of the prerequisites of progress for any generation is diversity. New possibilities emerge as a result of the random confluence of diverse ideas, materials, people. This is especially true with regard to the chance selection of genes in the mating process. But it is also true with regard to resources. Without a diversity of resources to implement new ideas, the ideas are useless. Therefore, our responsibility to future generations would require us to preserve diversity.

Since we have presupposed that future generations will be essentially the same as we are and that they will seek their own happiness, we cannot morally deny them the opportunity for progress. Therefore, we are obliged to leave them with the kinds and quantities of non-renewable resources that we can reasonably anticipate they will need. For example, we can already expect alternatives to petroleum as a source of energy. But petroleum has many other uses, such as lubrication and as an essential ingredient in making plastics and medicines. Thus, moral responsibility would demand that we save sufficient petroleum reserves for these purposes in the foreseeable future.

Genetic research has already provided us with many benefits, such as improved species of plants and animals and medical knowledge to prevent certain genetic diseases. Nevertheless, in the former case some provision must be made to preserve for research purposes the supplanted species of plants and animals.

The moral guideline for the fourth issue, environmental quality, can perhaps be best stated in John Locke's phrase "enough and as good." Here we are dealing with the conditions for survival of those future

actual persons who are the continuance of our species. By "enough and as good," I interpret Locke to mean that there should be no loss of opportunity to future generations as a result of our current environmental policies. In other words, the world they inherit must be at least as hospitable to them as ours is to us.

To realize the standard proposed by John Locke, it is conceivable that sacrifices must be made for the sake of the future. If the probable consequence of our life style today is to deny future generations the right to a decent environment, then clearly such sacrifices are required. They may also be required if the probable consequence of failure to sacrifice is a decrease in the level of happiness for future generations. The amount of sacrifice demanded of us today, and the resulting loss of some of our happiness, must be balanced against the probable increase of happiness to future generations due to environmental factors.

Since the safeguarding of our ozone layer is essential to our environment, major sacrifices in our life style might be required for the sake of future generations for the sake of preserving it. The management of nuclear wastes from electirc power production, on the other hand, will probably impose costs upon future generations, but will probably not threaten their existence, as long as proper precautions are taken. Therefore, present sacrifices to reduce nuclear wastes are not so morally urgent as those to protect the ozone layer. The problems of widespread air, land and water pollution from chemical wastes fall somewhere in between.

## A Final Word

In all of these discussions of the issues, not much reference has been made to the fifth presupposition, that we are one with future generations and that we will share actively (although not personally)

in their lives. Yet, it is probably the most crucial.

Any discussion about our responsibility to future generations must begin with the notion that in some important sense we are one with them. Among religious persons who believe in reincarnation, this notion is easy to accept. For them we are the future generations, much as we are the present one. So what they do for the future they are really doing for themselves in another life. Their responsibilities to future generations are responsibilities to themselves, and complaints made by one generation against the policies of a previous generation are complaints made against themselves.

Western religious teaching is not so helpful on this point. Instead of reincarnation, the after-life--if one believes in it-exists in a realm beyond this world. One may be judged for how he performed his responsibilities, including those towards future generations, but there will be no personal experience of the conditions his actions made possible. The individuality of each person extends to only one lifetime, after which there will be no further contact with the world and its future.

Is this Western emphasis on individuality the only truth to be followed in thinking intergenerationally? Isn't there, even in Western thought, the idea that--in a limited sense, to be sure--we live on through our children?

Let me try to demonstrate this idea via analogy. I may not speak to my cousin for most of my lifetime because of a quarrel in the family or because we live far apart. Nevertheless, I am still concerned about him, even if the concern is merely curiosity. If I hear of a natural disaster in his city, such as a tornado or earthquake, I begin to wonder. If I hear of his death, I have some feelings about it, feelings I do not have

when I read anonymous names in the obituary column of my daily newspaper. The ties of blood manifest themselves despite the years and despite the quarrels. The extended family is my family.

The same is true when we extend the family through time. We all have witnessed the phenomenon of "roots" in recent years. People want to know where they are from and what their lineage is, because these are important in knowing who they are. And so there is a search for the family tree, for the coat of arms, for the missing relatives.

We are more than individuals. We are parts of a much larger whole. To philosophize exclusively from the standpoint of one's individuality and one's self-interest is to miss this other truth: we are like knots in a vast net, and the reality of the resulting net-work of individuals expresses more of the truth than the mere sum of individuals. My responsibility, therefore, must go beyond the little knot I call myself. It extends to other people horizontally and vertically, spacially and temporally.

The statement that I am my brother's keeper is part of the very fabric of human existence. I am part of a species, and I share in the common responsibility for that species. What I do today lives on after me in my children, and in the children of those to whom I am related in the bond of humanness. My ultimate ideal, then, cannot be to self-interest or personal happiness, which will cease at my death, but to my perpetuation in the persons and things that carry on my reality as part of themselves. Even without reincarnation, my reality extends beyond my lifetime, for my life and my responsibilities are the threads out of the future is to be woven.

What we communicate to the future, therefore, is ourselves, and our responsibility to future generations is identical with our responsibility to ourselves. On this ultimate act of communication rests the meaning of our lives here and now. We are more than individuals. We are part of the future. Nothing else means so much.

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